

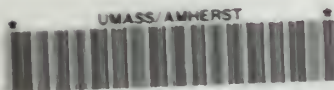
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Adolescents, Drugs and Alcohol
in Massachusetts: Year One

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A study of substance use among sixth grade students in Massachusetts was sponsored by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Division of Alcoholism and Drug Rehabilitation, in cooperation with the Department of Education and the Governor's Alliance Against Drugs. In May and June of 1987, 942 students from 26 public schools in 12 communities were administered a one hour questionnaire that asked about lifetime and current use of cigarettes, alcohol, and other drugs. Other information included demographic data, attitudes and opinions about substance use, parental, peer, and environmental influences on youth, and awareness of statewide substance use prevention messages. This same group of students will be surveyed each year for the next seven years until they complete high school to examine factors that contribute to or prevent the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol by adolescents. The information will enhance the planning of adolescent substance use prevention programming and curricula.

Sixteen community school systems were invited to participate in the study. They were chosen based on geographical location (western, central, northeastern and southeastern Massachusetts plus the Boston Metropolitan area), type of community (urban, suburban, growth, and rural), and type of school (elementary or middle). Twelve school systems, all members of the Governor's Alliance Against Drugs, took part in the study.

Signed parental and student consent forms were collected from all students who participated in the study. Eighty-five percent of the parents who returned the consent forms gave permission for their children to participate in the study. Survey staff administered the questionnaires to the students without the teacher or other school personnel present in the room, usually during the homeroom period. Students were assured of the confidentiality of their answers, and a Federal Certificate of Confidentiality was obtained to protect the data and participants in the study.

FINDINGS

Student Characteristics

* The majority of students (61%) were 12 years old when they took the survey, followed by students aged 11 (28%).

* The ethnic distribution of the sample closely approximated the ethnic distribution of sixth graders in the state: 84% of the students were white, 7% black, 7% Hispanic, 2% Asian and 1% American Indian.

* Two thirds (69%) of the students lived in nuclear families with both biological parents, and 11% with one biological and one stepparent. About 13% lived with a single parent.



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Lifetime and Current Use of Substances

- * One third (32%, n=299) of the students had drunk alcohol at least once in their lifetime. 16% (n=147) of the students had smoked a cigarette, and 6% (n=57) had tried illicit drugs such as marijuana or inhalants.
- * Students were most likely to report drinking wine (25%). Fewer students had drunk beer (12%), or liquor (9%). The amount drunk was usually a sip or taste a few times a year in the presence of their parents.
- * Only 6 students (less than 1%) reported ever using cocaine or crack.
- * Reported current use of substances (defined as use in the 30 days prior to the survey) was lower than reported lifetime use. One quarter (23%, n=217) of the students had drunk or sipped alcohol, 7% (n=67) had smoked or puffed a cigarette, and 3% (n=32) had tried illicit drugs.

Gender Differences

- * More males (38%) than females (27%) had tried alcohol. The difference was greatest for the use of beer (17% vs. 9%). In the 30 days prior to the survey, 26% of the boys and 21% of the girls had drunk alcohol.
- * More girls (17%) than boys (14%) had ever smoked a cigarette. However, current use of cigarettes was the same for both sexes, 7%.
- * For the most part, students who had used alcohol and cigarettes began use at the age of 11. Girls were more likely to have smoked cigarettes at an earlier age than boys; boys were more likely to have drunk beer at an earlier age than girls.
- * Illicit drugs, primarily marijuana and inhalants, had been tried by 7% (n=30) of the boys and 5% (n=24) of the girls. Only 4% (n=18) of boys and 3% (n=14) of girls reported current use of illicit substances.

Ethnic differences

Although the number of minority students in the study was small, certain trends in usage appear to be present. The trends reported here need to be confirmed in studies with larger numbers of minority students.

- * A greater percentage of Hispanic students (n=62, 33 females), especially males, had tried beer and liquor than had black (n=63, 38 females) or white (n=789, 429 females) students. One in five (21%, 13/62) of the Hispanic students reported having drunk beer versus 16% (10/63) of the black students and 11% (87/789) of the white students.

* One fifth (21%, 13/62) of the Hispanic students had tried liquor versus 9% (67/789) of the white students and 6% (4/63) of the black students. Black students, however, were more likely to have drunk wine (37%, 23/63) than were Hispanic (26%, 16/62) or white (24%, 188/789) students.

* More than one fourth of the Hispanic females (28%, 9/33) had smoked cigarettes in comparison to 19% of the black females (7/38) and 16% of the white females (69/429). For males, 32% (8/25) of the black students, 21% (6/29) of the Hispanic students, and 12% (42/360) of the white students had tried cigarettes.

* In general, black males were more likely to try marijuana (24%, 6/25) than were white (3%, 12/354) or Hispanic males (4%, 1/27). 5% (2/38) of black females had tried marijuana versus 2% (9/428) of white females and no Hispanic females.

Geographic Differences

* More students in urban communities (n=236) had drunk alcohol (41%) in their lifetime, versus an average of 29% of students in growth (n=217), suburban (n=240), and rural (n=249) communities. However, current use of alcohol differed little by type of community, with an average of 23% of the students reporting use.

* Urban students also reported the highest lifetime use of cigarettes (32%), while students in suburban communities reported the lowest lifetime use (5%) and students from growth and rural communities intermediate use (13% each). The same trend occurred but at lower rates for current use of cigarettes. 11% of urban students, 8% of rural, 7% of growth, and 3% of suburban students had smoked or puffed a cigarette in the 30 days prior to the survey.

* One in ten (11%) of urban students had tried illicit drugs, primarily marijuana, in comparison to 5% of the students in growth and in rural communities and 2% of the suburban community students. Just 5% of urban students and 3% of students from the other three community types reported current use of illicit substances.

Intention to Use Substances

* Almost all (99%) of the students reported they would not use an illicit drug in the next year.

* Most (93%) of them did not plan to smoke during the next year. Of the 66 students who had smoked in the last month, 43% did not plan to smoke next year.

* Eight out of ten (80%) of the students did not plan to drink beer in the next year. Of the 217 students who had tried alcohol in the last month, 48% did not intend to drink in the next year.

* Students who had never used a substance were more likely to report no intention to begin use in the next year than were students who had used a substance at some time in their lives.

Opinions

- * Students (88%) felt that classes about drug and alcohol abuse were useful. Two-thirds (65%) reported that their class had received lessons on drug and alcohol use that year.
- * The majority of students felt that it should be against the law to use marijuana (88%) and that teenagers should not be allowed to drink beer (72%). Less than half (46%) felt cigarette smoking should be against the law.
- * Three-fourths (72%) of the students stated that they could talk to their parents about using drugs or alcohol, and 40% were comfortable talking to a teacher about use.
- * The majority of students reported that their friends did not use substances and that their friends and parents would disapprove of the use of drugs and alcohol. One-fifth of the students were not sure what their friends or parents would think about their use of substances.
- * Three-fourths (73%) of the students agreed with the statement that "Governor Dukakis says don't use drugs." Half (50%) were familiar with the Governor's Alliance Against Drugs campaign, "Be Smart, Don't Start," featuring the rock group "The Jets".

CONCLUSIONS

Students in the sixth grade have not progressed far in their use of alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs. The vast majority do not intend to begin use and this decision should be reinforced through substance prevention education. Students who have begun to use substances appear to be still flexible and persuasible, and substance use prevention should take this flexibility into account. Even at this age differing trends in use are emerging and prevention programming needs to be appropriately targeted to specific groups. For instance, students in urban areas appear to be introduced to substances at an earlier age than are students from other communities. Girls appear to begin smoking at an earlier age than boys, but boys begin drinking at an earlier age than girls. Awareness of these types of differences should increase the sensitivity of prevention programming to the special needs and experiences of specific groups. Messages by public figures about substance use do seem to reach the students, and such efforts should be encouraged. Continued close monitoring of these trends, as is occurring in this seven year study, will aid the ongoing development of effective prevention efforts.

